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Transient Dwelling in German-language Nature Essay Writing: W.G. Sebald's *Die Alpen im Meer* and Peter Handke's *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*

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Abstract



Identity, place, and a sense of belonging to a specific region are factors which have shaped most twentieth and twenty-first century nature writing throughout Europe. This article argues that German-language nature writing is, however, a special case. Due to the appropriation of the aforementioned concepts in the Nazis' Blood and Soil doctrine, relations to a national landscape have become problematic for most post-Shoah generation writers. Born into a nation for which belonging and *Heimat* once were used as a means to justify the genocide of non-Aryan groups, access to an innocent, identificatory approach to nature is cut off. It is therefore no coincidence that both W.G. Sebald in *The Alps in the Sea* and Peter Handke in *Lesson of Montagne Sainte-Victoire* turn towards foreign landscape. Instead of pondering upon a specific German or Austrian region they belong to, they describe walks through Corsica and France. By linking their experience of these surroundings to other regions, to history and art, they create a truly European panorama and establish an aesthetics of transient dwelling. The form of the literary essay for which digressions, lengthy contemplations and sudden changes of discourse are typical enables them to combine a set of different perspectives on nature. Besides, the essay's meandering form matches their struggle with an identity rooted in a specific soil. And still, a sense of loss, represented in the guise of an expulsion metanarrative, pervades.

Keywords: German nature writing, Peter Handke, W.G. Sebald, literary essay, Shoah, Heimat

Resumen

Identidad, lugar y el sentimiento de pertenencia a una región específica son factores que han caracterizado la mayor parte de la escritura de la naturaleza de los siglos XX y XXI en toda Europa. Este artículo razona que la escritura de la naturaleza en lengua alemana es no obstante un caso especial. A causa de la apropiación de los conceptos anteriormente mencionados por parte de los nazis en su doctrina de Sangre y Suelo, las relaciones con el paisaje nacional se volvieron problemáticas para la mayoría de la generación post-Shoah de escritores. Siendo natural de una nación que antes utilizaba conceptos como pertenencia y *Heimat* para justificar el genocidio de grupos no-arios, ya no existen posiciones inocentes e identificatorias hacia la naturaleza. Por eso no es casualidad que tanto W.G. Sebald en *Los Alpes en el mar* y Peter Handke en *La doctrina del Sainte-Victoire* se centren en paisajes extranjeros. En vez de ocuparse de una región específica de Alemania o Austria, a las que pertenecen, describen excursiones por Córcega y Francia. Asociando sus experiencias en esta naturaleza con otras regiones, con la historia y el arte, establecen un panorama verdaderamente europeo y crean una estética de pertenencia temporal. La forma del ensayo literario en el que las digresiones, las contemplaciones extensas y los cambios discursivos súbitos son típicos, les permite combinar una serie de perspectivas distintas sobre la naturaleza. Además, las divagaciones del ensayo se corresponden con las dificultades de los autores a la hora de luchar con una identidad enraizada en un suelo específico. Y aun así se difunde un sentido de pérdida, representado en forma de metanarración de expulsión.

Palabras clave: nature writing alemán, Peter Handke, W.G. Sebald, ensayo literario, shoah, Heimat

What matters more: where you come from or where you are going? For most nature writers categories such as home, place of origin, and personal identity are deeply interwoven. There is a genuinely German word which captures this fusion: *Heimat*. The term *Heimat* points to the interplay between a locality of dwelling or origin and identity (Gebhard, Geisler, and Schröder 10-11), thus constituting a frame for questions of rootedness and belonging which is situated in a regional environment. Curiously there is no direct translation for *Heimat* in other European languages. The French, for instance, use the term *pays natal*, and the English language knows the *home country*, but there is no such thing as a French or English *Heimat* (Hüppauf 111). In their emphasis on the nation both languages differ from the German *Heimat*. When *Heimat* discourse emerged around 1800 Germany, unlike France and Great Britain, was not yet a unified nation, but rather a loose association of small states (Hüppauf 109-13; Gebhard, Geisler, and Schröder 13-14). In France and England the identification with the nation *as Heimat* was made possible by the longer existence of a nation state; whereas the focus on human bonds with a particular region, implicit in *Heimat*, matched the fragmented structure of Germany, which was maintained until the creation of the *kleindeutsches Reich*¹ under King William I of Prussia in 1871.²

Despite the fact that nations can provoke strong feelings of belonging, *Heimat* exists independently as it precedes national rootedness (Hüppauf 113). Gebhard, Geisler and Schröder therefore point out that *Heimat* undercuts the greater overarching context of meaning promoted within the national paradigm in its focus on manageable smaller local spaces (14). In addition, Bernd Hüppauf stresses the fact that we develop a sense of belonging for the first time during our childhood when connections between the self and its regional environment are established and memorised (112). This focus on private, small-scale experience, however, does not mean that the categories of *Heimat* and the nation in Germany have always been mutually exclusive. When the National Socialists seized power in 1933 they centralised the political system and tied Germans closer to their country of origin by merging ideas of *Heimat*, loyalty to the *Führer* and the nation. During the National Socialist period notions of community were based on ethnic origin and rooted in a specific German soil, resulting in the exclusion and later the murder and

¹ *Kleindeutsches Reich* refers to a lesser German Empire, excluding Austria. For a concise overview of the political situation in pre-unified Germany see Sperber.

² In the meantime two alternative concepts emerged. On the one hand German intellectuals relied on the idea of Germany as *Kulturnation*, a nation unified by its rich cultural tradition, on the other hand the German forest appeared in the fairy tales and poetry of German Romanticism and in Romantic paintings. These two concepts paved the way for a shared image and metaphor of a type of landscape uniquely German that could not be found in other European states. Helmut Walser Smith summarises this development as follows: "meadows were no longer green but German; rivers, especially the Rhine, were declared national sanctuaries; and oak trees, as metaphors for steadfast loyalty, referred beyond themselves. The woods themselves took on a sacral aura as a site of a special kind of solitude ('Waldeinsamkeit') and Germanic freedom ('germanische Waldfreiheit')" (241-42). One could, accordingly, argue that the German forest, like the black-red-gold German tricolour, functioned as a connecting icon which helped to overcome common feelings of a lack in matters of national identity. It is accordingly not an exaggeration to say that nature played an important role in the formation of a German national consciousness.

genocide of non-Aryan groups. David Clarke therefore concludes that the “discussion of place, particularly as a constituent of belonging and identity, is especially complex in the context of German culture” (Clarke 20). To see only the abuse of *Heimat* practised by the Nazis is, however, too narrowing. The term *Heimat* can neither be limited to right-wing policies of exclusion nor can it be totally stripped off its history.³ Recent discussions of *Heimat* rather tend to see it as an open concept, a generator of associations which can be split into two strands: on the one hand *Heimat* discourse is determined by strategies of exclusion that rely on the backdrop of the other, the foreigner, or the unknown space against which it is defined, peaking in the Nazis’ racist ideology; on the other hand more inclusive approaches accept the inevitability of the hybrid (Gebhard, Geisler, and Schröder 9; 18-22; 44-5).

Drawing on Peter Handke’s *Lesson of Montagne Sainte-Victoire* (*Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*, 1980) and W.G. Sebald’s *The Alps in the Sea* (*Die Alpen im Meer*, 2001), this article explores how contemporary German nature essay writing is pervaded and disturbed by hints at the National Socialist appropriation and abuse of the concept of *Heimat*. Although both Handke and Sebald oppose the national paradigm, by turning towards European landscapes instead of pondering on a national *Heimat* space, their writing is haunted by images of violence and exclusion that can be linked to the right-wing strand of *Heimat* discourse. In this context the practice of walking through European landscapes can be read as an aesthetic strategy which is pursued to evade and to approach traumatic German history in circular movements. In separating the notion of dwelling from its local or national context the two essays are representative of a new understanding of *Heimat* which, since the 1970s, has emerged in German literature and art with a shift towards transregional spheres of identity (Gebhard, Geisler, and Schröder 38-45). In the following pages I am going to demonstrate that in blending bits of memory, reflections, and descriptions the essay genre is particularly well-suited first of all to deal with this ambiguous relationship with national *Heimat* and secondly to explore and represent the complexity of our natural and socio-cultural environment in a transnational age. Before analysing the two essays, I will briefly outline the theoretical framework that underlies my discussion.

The Lost *Heimat*, Dwelling and Essayistic Nature Writing

Nature writing, a type of nonfictional writing occupied with nature that draws on empiricism and experience of place,⁴ emerged in the decades around 1800.⁵ The nature

³ Literary texts tend to be at least ambiguous concerning their adaptation of Blood and Soil ideology as Axel Goodbody points out in his re-evaluation of the *Heimat* concept in German novels around 1900. See Goodbody “Heimat”.

⁴ Don Scheese, for instance, describes nature writing as “a first-person, nonfiction account of an exploration, both physical (outward) and mental (inward), of a predominantly nonhuman environment” (6).

⁵ The first pieces of nature writing usually mentioned are *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* by British ornithologist Gilbert White (1720-1793), which was first published in 1788/89 and has been reprinted due to its immense popularity almost three-hundred times since; and *Travels* by the American

writing genre shares with *Heimat* discourse not only its point of origin but also a strong interest in the (pre)conditions of dwelling and belonging. Both are key concepts of ecocritical research. Greg Garrard, for instance, in *Ecocriticism* lists dwelling as a major trope, an extended metaphor, of literary representations of nature (117–145). In its traditional sense dwelling is defined in marked contrast to “a transient state” as “the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life, and work” (Garrard 117). In times of accelerated social mobility, however, this old notion of dwelling seems slightly outdated. The emergence of interconnected transnational networks of social interaction challenges clear boundaries between local and global space (Gebhard, Geisler, and Schröder 47; Hüppauf 131).

In her book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) Ursula Heise argues that the complexity of our globalised world demands new ways of defining place-sense and belonging. Heise promotes the concept of ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’ that stresses the importance of a sense of global rather than local belonging and asks us to expand the margins of environmental responsibility beyond national borders. As opposed to the trope of dwelling in its traditional meaning outlined by Garrard, Heise points to aesthetics grounded in liquid bonds with the environment. According to Heise eco-cosmopolitan perspectives need to draw on “aesthetic forms that do justice both to the sense that places are inexorably connected to the planet as a whole and to the perception that this wholeness encompasses vast heterogeneities by imagining the global environment as a kind of collage in which all the parts are connected but also lead lives of their own” (64). Thinking of forms and genres that fulfil this condition, the literary essay comes to mind.

Since Michel de Montaigne published the first volume of his *Essais* in 1580 typical features of the essay genre include: its capability to incorporate material from a variety of discourses,⁶ an affinity towards extensive digressions and reflections, a subjective point of view, and sudden changes in scale in order to generate universal knowledge from personal experience.⁷ The literary essay is thus especially well suited to represent heterogeneity as it is capable of holding and reflecting complexity. Nature essayists assemble all kinds of discursive material related to nature and re-contextualise it within their own strand of argument. Breaks, loops and cross-connections allow them to reflect on the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues, but they also mirror a state of displacement, a quest for identity and a place to belong.

ornithologist William Bartram (1739-1823), which first appeared in 1791. In Germany the holist visions of Goethe and Alexander von Humboldt who point to the inherent interconnectedness of the natural world has influenced early nature writing. See Axel Goodbody's chapter on Goethe's role as a predecessor of environmental discourse in Germany (“Nature, Culture and Technological Change” 45-86).

⁶ Max Bense, with regard to this aesthetic feature of the essay, has introduced the useful term of an *ars combinatoria* (Bense 414-24) and Christy Wampole recently compared the essayist to a DJ who samples loops and breaks.

⁷ Definitions of the essay usually describe it as the written discourse produced and uttered by an empirical individual speaker, who is often speaking in the first person, on a topic which is approached on the basis of subjective experiences and for which the interest of a common reader is sought (Schlafler 522-5).

In blending impressions from different European localities Sebald and Handke make use of an aesthetics of transient dwelling that can be understood in terms of an eco-cosmopolitan worldview. To reduce their aesthetics only to the matter of an increasingly globalised world would, however, overlook the national realm of experience from which their writing emerges. The landscapes they roam abound in bunkers, empty bullet casings, and hunters which function as symbolic reminders of the Nazi past, or, in a more general sense, as reminders of a history that has often peaked in hyper-violent confrontations between different nations, ethnic groups, or communities, and not least in environmental destruction.

Compared with other nature writing traditions, where national landscapes provide a common frame for national identification, post-World War II German nature writing is a special case.⁸ German writer W.G. Sebald, and Austrian-born Peter Handke are both well known for their uneasy relationship with their homelands. Whereas Sebald left Germany for good in 1970 to become a lecturer at the University of East Anglia, Handke continues to live in a suburb of Paris, observing the Germanic world from the outside. Although neither of them experienced the horrors of Nazi terror, their writing reveals a post-memorial struggle with the past. Their relation to nature is disrupted due to a problematic national identity which they address indirectly by pointing to the traces of destruction they find in nature. Austrian writers in particular have pointed to this “uncanny home,” or *Unheimliche Heimat* as Sebald called an essay collection on Austrian writers.⁹ Referring to the case of Jewish-Austrian writer and Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, who writes in his 1967 essay *Wieviel Heimat braucht der Mensch?* (*How Much Home Does a Person Need?*) about the impossibility of re-establishing a connection with his childhood memories of his Austrian hometown, and therefore is unable to link his current identity to his past, Friederike Eigler points out that the movement of “expulsion” captures the post-Shoah sense of home best (41).

Sebald and Handke's essay writing can be understood in terms of such a dynamics of expulsion as they experience their being in the world as a state of separation that needs to be overcome. In both essays the walk provides a frame narrative that illustrates a state of mind for which motion is more important than dwelling. Especially for the post-Shoah nature essay this structure of quest is central. It is derived from a longing for a home which “no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii), as Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia in her important study. The expulsion from this home is accompanied by a strong “sentiment of loss and displacement” (ibid.), leading to

⁸ American writer Rockwell Gray, for instance, points out that one's “sense of personal identity depends upon the recapture in memory of the key places in which one's life has taken place” (53), adding that patriotism results from one's experience of being rooted in a certain local place.

⁹ In an interview, the recent Austrian winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, Elfriede Jelinek for instance has argued: “Man nimmt deutsche Erde, und sie zerfällt zu Asche in der Hand”/“You take German soil and it crumbles to ashes in your hand” (Berka 137), hinting at the disturbed relation to nature due to the traumatic history of Germany. Heidi Schlipphacke justly states that Germany and Austria are the “two European nations of necessity most fixated on the history of Nazism,” and she comes to the same conclusion as Clarke, pointing out that “Heimat, the mythical national home, has been irrevocably compromised following the fall of Nazism and the caesura of the Holocaust” (Schlipphacke 14).

constant motion.¹⁰ Apart from this, their sense of place also ties in with Heise's concept of belonging in a globalised age rather than drawing on firmer notions of dwelling and *Heimat*. The process-like quality of essayistic writing enables them to transmit a sense of constant re-orientation. Although feelings of having been expelled pervade both essays, Sebald and Handke foreground global connectedness—an important factor in Heise's aesthetics of eco-cosmopolitanism—by adopting a digressive, free style of writing that is driven by their reflections and subjective connotations as they combine depictions of the places they explore in their present time with memories that lead them away to other places throughout Europe and evoke other historical periods. What superficially appears to be an inability to stick with one topic is an aesthetic strategy that enables both writers to create a complex essayistic type of nature writing as I am going to demonstrate now.

Peter Handke's *Lesson of Montagne Sainte-Victoire*

Peter Handke wrote *Lesson of Montagne Sainte-Victoire* towards the end of 1979 at a time when he took up residence in the Austrian city of Salzburg.¹¹ During this year he travelled twice to the Montagne Sainte-Victoire, a mountain in southern France that overlooks Aix-en-Provence. The essay describes his two excursions and links them to various other walks and a wide range of reflections on all kinds of subjects with a special focus on Paul Cézanne's paintings of the mountain.¹² The heterogeneous form of the text might be one reason why it has often been stated that *Lesson of Montagne Sainte-Victoire* defies easy categorization. There are, however, several factors indicating closeness to the essay genre. Not only its length—the essay is approximately a hundred pages long

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau's posthumously published *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (*Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, 1782) provides a model for this kind of writing as Rousseau brings together depictions of his individual explorations of nature and digressive reflections on a wide range of subjects. During the last years of his life, Rousseau was in a constant state of anger as his books were burnt and he was expelled from French society. The *Reveries* therefore begin with a statement of loneliness and outsiderdom: "I am now alone on earth, no longer having any brother, neighbor, friend, or society other than myself" (*Reveries* 1). Fleeing his political persecutors and enemies, he sought refuge at the house of a local tax collector on St. Peter's Island in the middle of Lake Bienne in Switzerland. Lake Bienne is where chapters five and seven are set. In those he turns most explicitly to his relation to the natural world. Physical locations trigger memories and his reflections are often concerned with his place in the world. The meanderings of Rousseau's essay are, therefore, also a formal expression of the content as the form matches the evasive movements. Both Sebald (Sebald, *Rousseau*) and Handke (Handke, SPIEGEL-Interview) have read Rousseau's essay cycle and refer to it. In the estate of W.G. Sebald a Penguin edition of the English translation was found. It was displayed among other items in the Sebald exhibition which took place in the national literary archive in Marbach (26.09.2008–01.02.2009). Rousseau's book is listed as item number 3 in the section entitled "Wasser" of the exhibition catalogue. For more information concerning Sebald's estate see Gfrereis/Strittmatter 2008. Peter Handke mentions *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* in an interview with the magazine *Der Spiegel* during July 1978, more than a year before he started to write *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*.

¹¹ Marton Marko points out that Handke's residency in Austria was accompanied by an extensive engagement with his national origin and issues of *Heimat* which are also prevalent in most of his works from this period (67).

¹² Although a 1978 Parisian exhibition of Paul Cézanne's Montagne Sainte-Victoire paintings inspired the essay and gives the text many important impulses, the essay cannot be reduced to this theme alone. Parry even goes so far as to state: "*Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire* is not a book about Cézanne" (Parry 48).

and can be read in one or two sittings—but also the subjective perspective of Handke's essayistic first-person narrator, the discursive breaks, and the combination of descriptions of nature with philosophical reflections put it into the category of the literary essay.¹³

At one point, Handke explicitly reflects on his writing, when he denies the possibility of a coherent narrative and states: "For a time I thought of treating particular aspects—the mountain and me, the pictures and me—and setting them down side by side as unconnected fragments" (190). And, although finally he decides against this option, the text remains open, a steady process, an unfinished product that matches Heise's demand for an aesthetics of hybridity. Nevertheless, it is driven by the desire to reveal the interconnectedness of different issues and to showcase, in Handke's words, "the One in All" (190)—a concept not unlike Alexander von Humboldt's vision of a *Cosmos* or Goethe's ideal of scientific holism.

As opposed to such encyclopaedic projects of the early nineteenth century, Handke's longing to reveal interconnections is, however, not a result of his interest in natural history. Instead, his explorations of nature are rather determined by a feeling of separation (cf. Borgards 18-21). By opening the essay with the statement "once I felt at home in colors" (9), a former state of unification is evoked and then set aside. In passages like this, Handke undertakes an act of self-fashioning. He presents himself as a displaced person, and in doing so, links his experience in nature to the tradition of expulsion narratives, which goes back to Adam and Eve's mourning for a lost Garden of Eden.

Expulsion is both the starting point of the essay and a recurring motif. Handke further goes on to ponder on the aesthetic hostility of his environment. Thinking back, he recalls his anger at finding that every shape he saw during his time in Berlin served a purpose, that every form of an object was a result of its function in a world that was "labeled in every detail, yet totally speechless and voiceless" (186). Referring to processes of re-landscaping, Handke states that he "detested the geology of Germany; its valleys, rivers and mountains" (Ibid.). For Handke the German landscape represents a peculiar German attitude towards nature. As opposed to such purpose-based modes of thinking that disenchant the world by seeing it mainly as a resource that can be used and shaped according to human needs, Handke develops a unique nature aestheticism. In keeping with nature writing's focus on empirical nature and real places, Handke refers to actual geographical localities, but his descriptions remind us that the depiction of nature can be its invention (Rohde 11). By celebrating both language itself and his intense perception of nature's beauty—beauty being in the German idealist tradition 'the purposeless'—he disconnects his environment from human purposes and acknowledges its intrinsic value. Stefan Hofer, therefore, convincingly explains that

¹³ Its form somehow resembles the coat of Handke's travelling companion on the second journey which is "pieced together from different-colored materials" (197) as it abounds in echoes of other books and authors, like Goethe, Grillparzer and Stifter. Handke, however, usually does not name the authors to the effect that, integrated into his own work, they become a part of a "storehouse of allusion and metaphor, or narrative and discursive fragments to be disposed of at will" (Parry 68).

Handke's introversion is not to be mocked as pure narcissism, but can be understood in terms of an ecological poetics. He argues that Handke's writing shares some typical features of nature writing such as precise indication of the geographical location, detailed descriptions of flora and fauna, and a tendency to replace consumer-friendly plot movements with landscape descriptions and reflections. Handke's subjective perspective is closely bound to his experience of nature as he links his being in nature to reflections on his place in the world (Hofer 132, 138-39).

In addition, Handke's digressive walking serves as a non-purpose based mode of travelling. Instead of heading straight to the summit, like other famous mountaineers before him have done, Handke rather circles around it, walking on motorways, coming across military areas. He is, in other words, exploring the peripheral space and does not reach the peak of the mountain until we reach the middle of the book. And then there is no peak experience.¹⁴ So Handke's book is rather an anti-mountaineering account with his loops being matched by the meandering movements of the text.¹⁵ While walking, Handke's narrator experiences a series of small epiphanies, sudden realizations of nature's beauty. Those moments of beauty are in no way restricted to wild nature, quite the opposite. He remembers being in Paris, for example. Standing on an overpass at the edge of the city, Handke looks down at the Boulevard Périphérique, "which appeared to [him] in mobile gold colors" and in this moment he believes "that someone like Goethe should envy [him] for living at the end of the twentieth century" (183). In a description of Berlin he takes this poetics of hybridization even a step further, adopting landscape description techniques to the city: "the houses still seemed to have been scattered at random over a steppelike plain" (187). By comparing the city to nature and including even waste like plastic bags and polystyrene into his depictions of nature, he presents nature and culture as deeply interwoven entities to which he attaches feelings of belonging. In doing so he creates a new liquid concept of transient dwelling that draws on epiphanic experiences of wholeness.

Under the surface of Handke's quest for beauty, however, often lie memories of the horrors of World War II and Nazi terror. The recurrent images of soldiers, bullets and violence in the natural setting are striking. When he is standing on top of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire, instead of describing an impressive mountain panorama, he first draws our attention to "a tiny stone military hut, manned by two soldiers" (173). Signs of military intervention are universal in Handke's Europe and they are not limited to the past, as Handke meets soldiers practically every time he is wandering. His depiction of the encounter with a large, aggressive black watchdog at a military outpost of the Foreign Legion is one of the more memorable scenes of the essay.

Nature is perceived as a militarized zone in this essay and this perception also influences the imagery Handke uses. After having spotted a shooting stand in a forest

¹⁴ This is, as Jürgen Goldstein recently put it, the "proper *Lesson of Montagne Sainte-Victoire*": The days of adventurous discoveries and explorations of the world are over, not for individual people, but as a collective phenomenon (Goldstein 250).

¹⁵ Ulrike Weymann emphasizes the interconnectedness between walking, thinking, remembering, and perceiving in *Lesson of Montagne Sainte-Victoire* (Weymann 12).

near Salzburg, a flock of birds sounds to him “like a burst of gunfire” (207) and a “pale-gray crest road running straight westward looks something like a military highway. Bare saplings screech as they rub together in the wind, or send out muffled messages in Morse code. The resinous spots on the bark of the trees mark bullet holes” (209). Militarisms constitute a semantic field throughout the whole essay.

The beginning of the text links the military world to Handke's personal experience of his local *Heimat*. It takes us back to Handke's hometown in Austria and might be understood as a key to the underlying structure of expulsion and quest:

Twenty years ago I was examined for fitness for military service. Though ordinarily rather shaky about colors, I came off rather well in the color test, which consisted in making the right selection from a jumble of numbered dots of color. When I got home and reported the outcome ('Fit for armed service'), my stepfather spoke up (for ordinary purposes, we had stopped talking to each other) to say he was now proud of me for the first time. (143)

One might wonder why this scene is situated at the very beginning of the text. There are two possible reasons. First, Handke draws our attention to the problematic relationship with his stepfather and later points to the loose contact with his biological father, too. The stepfather comes across as authoritarian and rather unlikable person. Besides, Handke's problematic relationship with his stepfather also hints, in a metaphorical sense, at problems with regard to his sense of national belonging. When he asks himself why his stepfather's remark, in his memory, is tied to “the fresh reddish-brown of the garden which the man had just spaded” (143), he draws a connection between his national identity (becoming a soldier in a national army) and a sense of home (the ground in front of the house of his stepfather). Handke makes it clear that he cannot go back to his former home, the stepfather's place.

It is certainly no coincidence that he further explains his family roots in the same chapter, in a passage entitled *The Cold Field*, where he writes about a mass extermination site of the Nazis in Paris. It is situated on a hill which is known as the “Montagne des Fusillés.” And the trees on top of it still bear the bullet holes of the Nazis. When Handke describes this hill, it becomes clear that all kinds of different experiences in nature—beauty, anger, art and historic memory—cannot be separated for the narrator. In his essayistic view they are all brought together. Nature is a place of memory for him that leads him back into European history, back to the destruction caused by the Nazis.

At the same time, his expulsion from a former state of belonging results essentially from his being born into a nation which was responsible for crimes like these. By setting side by side the description of the extermination site and explorations into the different national roots of his family, he establishes a connection between his personal history and national history. Whereas his stepfather and his father are Germans, and he was born in Austria, all his mother's ancestors belonged to the Slovenian-speaking minority in Carinthia. Slovenian was supposedly Handke's first language, although he has no memories of it and says that: “at any rate I've almost

forgotten the language. (I'd always had a feeling that I came from somewhere else.)" (184).

At another point, when he considers his current dwelling, during the year in which he undertook the two trips to France, he mentions his feeling of uprootedness: "I was going through a period of transition; a year without fixed residence. [...] I still had a few months' time before going back to Austria. In the meantime, I lived only in other people's homes. I was torn between joyful anticipation and dread of a narrowing" (159), and he declares Homer's Odysseus to be his "hero" and feels impelled by the idea to "circle through Europe" (160).

The motif of the wanderer is well known in Romanticism and in the German *Bildungsroman* likewise, representing a quest for identity and a place in society. A connection can be drawn between the open form of the essay, Handke's current meandering movements in nature, his digressive reflections on depictions of nature, his discomfort with his national identity, and the concept of belonging somewhere. Whereas the hero of the *Bildungsroman* in the end usually finds a place he belongs to, this essay presents a rather different solution. Instead of finding a fixed home, Handke's narrator keeps on walking. And apart from describing his environment, his thoughts also often digress. He compares different landscapes in Europe, ranging from his native country Austria to France and Germany. The essay form allows him to jump from one landscape memory to the next. And in doing so Handke creates a truly European panorama, one that matches Ursula K. Heise's concept of a sense of place in times of globalisation: "an understanding of how a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected" (Heise 21). Instead of separating each individual experience of nature, Handke sets them in relation to each other. These cross-references derive from the perspective of his narration, more precisely from his thought patterns which we, the readers, are able to follow by reading the text. It is actually Handke's constant walking which leads us through the text.

By emphasising slowness and an intense perception of the environment, Handke creates an ethic of respect toward nature. It becomes clear that the practice of walking is linked to a sense of belonging. The following scene gives a good impression of a moment where the narrator experiences a temporary break-through, back to a former state of equilibrium.

From one side came the afternoon sun, from the other a light fall wind. What had been written with a plow under the earth's surface the year before now blossomed and sent forth an intense glow. The grass blades by the roadside passed in majestic flight. My pace was deliberately slow, as I walked in the whiteness of the mountain. What was happening? Nothing. And there was no need for anything to happen. Freed from all expectation, I was far from ecstasy. My even gait became a dance. I was an outstretched body, carried by its own steps as on a litter. [...] Yes, in that moment I myself knew 'who I am' (163-64).

This passage bears all the characteristics of a typical epiphany in a text by Handke: unexpectedness, physical ecstasy and mystical identification (Bartmann 194-97). The experience of nature's beauty in motion allows Handke to relocate himself both within

nature and within society. And it becomes clear that *Heimat* is for Handke not to be found in a specific place but emerges rather spontaneously out of a fleeting existence (Eigler 39). The epiphanic experience, however, is transient. It cannot be translated into a constant state of being in the world (Tabah 161; see also Borgards 35-36). Handke's ability to observe his environment closely allows him to negotiate his place in nature. And, in a more general sense, he demonstrates how our being in the world, if we experience our environment consciously, can change our self-perception. In the end, Handke is able to relate to his environment, but a feeling of having been expelled pervades. It leaves Handke's essayistic narrator with no other choice than to keep on walking, until the next epiphany takes him back to a former experience of unity that has been lost.

W.G. Sebald's *The Alps in the Sea*

The Alps in the Sea was first published in 2001 shortly before W.G. Sebald's death.¹⁶ Initially, it was supposed to be a chapter of an unfinished book-project on the Mediterranean island Corsica, which Sebald started after completing *The Rings of Saturn* (*Die Ringe des Saturn*, 1995).¹⁷ Later, it was included in *Campo Santo*, a posthumous collection of essays. Although classified as a short piece of fiction by the editor of *Campo Santo*, the category of literary essay suits the text better. It is a dozen pages long and it bears, like many other works of Sebald, the key features of a travelogue. During his excursions through the island the narrator comments on the unscrupulous deforestation which took place in Corsica during the period of modernization and industrialization in the mid-nineteenth century, and he reflects on the long tradition of hunting in European history. Not unlike the structure of *The Rings of Saturn* and similar to Rousseau's *Reveries*¹⁸ and Handke's writing, the wanderings and walking tours of the essayistic narrator give rise to its digressive form and evoke the image of an unsettled mind in constant motion.

Drawing on a variety of sources from this period, documents by explorers, painters and writers like Etienne de la Tour, Edward Lear, Vivien de Saint Martin and Ferdinand Gregorovius evoke early nineteenth century Corsica as an intact, highly flourishing ecosystem where the ground "was densely overgrown with all kinds of different bushes and herbs. Arbutus grew here, a great many ferns, heathers and juniper

¹⁶ The essay was first published under the title "Die Alpen im Meer. Ein Reisebild." *Literaturen* 1 (2001): 30-33. The fragments of the so-called 'Corsica project' were later published: W.G. Sebald: "Aufzeichnungen aus Korsika. Zur Natur- & Menschenkunde" *Wandernde Schatten. W.G. Sebalds Unterwelt*. Eds. Ulrich von Bülow, Heike Gfrereis and Ellen Stittmatter. Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft 2008: 129-209.

¹⁷ The Corsica book was also supposed to include a chapter on Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Bülow 216). Graeme Gilloch calls the posthumously published excerpts from the Corsica project "fragments" and "anything but finished business" (Gilloch 128) and although this is certainly true for most of the text corpus, it holds only partially true for *The Alps in the Sea* as it was published in a version authorized by Sebald during his lifetime.

¹⁸ See footnote 10 for more information on Rousseau as a model for Handke's and Sebald's expulsion narratives.

bushes, grasses, asphodels and dwarf cyclymen" (38) provided a habitat for a variety of animals: "eagles and vultures soared above the rock-slides, hundreds of siskins and finches darted through the canopy of the forest, quail and partridge nested under the low shrubs, and butterflies fluttered everywhere around" (40). The botanical gaze, which dominates this passage, culminates in the usage of Linnaeus's taxonomy while referring to an extinct species of deer, the "*Cervus elaphus corsicanus*" (40).¹⁹ However, when Sebald goes on to describe the deer's eyes, "wide with fear in constant expectation of death" (40), it becomes clear that descriptions of nature have an ambivalent double status in this essay: they are real and symbolic at the same time.²⁰ The descriptions of flora and fauna in this passage evoke the biblical tale of a paradise garden where all species are present and provide a background against which the extinction of various species and the loss of the forests seem to be even worse. The fairy-tale character of the opening sentence of the essay—"Once upon a time Corsica was entirely covered by forest"—already points to the dominant sense of nostalgia in the text. Besides, the island is once explicitly described as Edenic, when Sebald refers to "an entomologist from Dresden" whom Ferdinand Gregorovius met in Corsica and "who told him that the island struck him as a paradise garden" (40), hinting at the prevalent expulsion metanarrative and the connection between the loss of *Heimat* and a quest for a sense of belonging.

It may seem strange that Sebald mentions the name of the city of origin of the entomologist but not his name, with the effect that our focus is shifted to that city: Dresden. Place names often appear in Sebald's work. However, in this case they provide a key to the subtext of the essay: the air raids, and especially the Dresden bombing.²¹ The historical connection to the name of the city is not made more explicit. To a reader of Sebald, however, who is aware of the writer's obsession with the air raids of World War II the connection between a place that has lost its peace through forceful destruction and Dresden is quite obvious. By setting passages on the destruction of the Corsican environment side by side with hints at German history Sebald infuses a sense of hidden interconnectedness into his writing. The harm humans do, in this essay, most notably is portrayed in the guise of the figure of the hunter.

Walking around the island, Sebald's narrator encounters a group of Corsican hunters whom he describes as soldier-like characters: "the young men, in a kind of paramilitary gear, drive around in jeeps and cross-country vehicles as if they thought the countryside were occupied, or they were expecting an enemy invasion" (41). Although the narrator notes that "the game that once lived in such abundance in the forests of the island has been eradicated almost without a trace today" (40), the ritual of hunting continues to exist. The striving for destruction seems to be universal. Like Handke,

¹⁹ The species was extirpated in the early 1970s. At the turn of the century it was successfully re-introduced from Sardinia. Sebald could, however, not have known this when he wrote the essay.

²⁰ Axel Goodbody points out a similar use of nature depictions in *The Rings of Saturn*, where descriptions are alternating "between observed reality (geological, botanical and social), projections of the author's state of mind, and emblems of his conception of history" ("Life Writing and Nature Writing" 344).

²¹ As Graeme Gilloch has shown, this subtext was even more explicit in the original draft of the Corsica project (135-36).

Sebald uses sudden breaks and digressions, peculiar to the essay genre, to combine memories from different European localities. He thereby creates a transnational patchwork of scenes of slaughtering and hunting: childhood memories of game carcasses in Germany, the Corsican hunters and a memory of fake plastic trees in the shop window of an English butcher which promise cheap absolution from the cruelties against nature.

The ambiguity of hunting and the shame Sebald's narrator feels when he thinks about the destruction of nature is expressed by a re-telling of Flaubert's *La Légende de Saint Julien L'Hospitalier*, a story the narrator allegedly found in a book in his hotel room. Such coincidences are typical yet highly fictitious, as Sebald most likely brought along the Flaubert book to Corsica.²² The tale presents a young nobleman, Julien, who struggles with two strong forces within him: on the one hand the pleasure he derives from killing animals—it first starts with a church mouse and goes on to an entire valley of deer—and on the other his guilt and his striving for absolution. After killing numerous animals, Julien, like Kafka's hunter Gracchus, wanders "through the world which is no longer in a state of grace" (45).²³ And again references to the narrative of expulsion are used to illustrate his feelings: "He refuses to hunt any more, but sometimes his terrible passion comes over him again in his dreams; he sees himself, like our father Adam, surrounded by all the creatures in the garden of paradise, and he has only to reach out his arm and they are dead" (45). Flaubert's story is an important intertext, since it explains the nexus of destruction, guilt and evasion. Although Graeme Gilloch claims that European metropolitans are very different in comparison with Julian—"killing causes us no torments or sufferings" (Gilloch 137)—this is certainly not true for Sebald's essayistic narrator.²⁴ Like Julian he is haunted by the images of burning forests and dying animals. At one point he remembers a traumatic incident from his childhood when frozen deer were delivered to the local butcher and he as a schoolboy happened to walk by and "could not move from the spot for a long time, so spellbound was I by the sight of the dead animals" (43). One might even go further and claim that the meandering form of the text is driven by this guilt as it illustrates the evasion of St. Julian, who is punished for lustfully killing animals. From the vice follows the expulsion from the former *Heimat* which results in restlessness. In this he resembles Sebald's other protagonists who are also often wanderers and usually Germans who struggle with the Nazi past.

Although Sebald does not refer to German history explicitly in this essay, the text has to be read in the context of essays like *Natural History of Destruction* which discuss the consequences of wartime fire-bombing in Germany and guilt, memory and mourning

²² In a draft of the Corsica project, Sebald notes that he brought the book himself: "Gestern, als es Abend wurde, bin ich am Fenster gesessen & habe in dem Band der Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, den ich mir vor der Abfahrt noch in meine Tasche geschoben hatte, die gleichfalls darin enthaltene Geschichte Un cœur simple gelesen" ("Aufzeichnungen aus Korsika" 145).

²³ Elena Agazzi justly points out that the hunter is among the key figures in Sebald's work. In *Schwindel. Gefühle*, for instance, Kafka's short story *Der Jäger Gracchus* is more than once evoked (388).

²⁴ According to Goodbody "Sebald shows nature as sharing in our human vulnerability and ultimate fate of decay and disintegration [...], especially in *After Nature* and *The Rings of Saturn*, nature participates in victimhood paralleling that of the Jews" ("Life Writing and Nature Writing" 343).

(Agazzi 388). From the memory of the catastrophically destructive National Socialist period results an intense feeling of discomfort in all matters concerning place and identity, which is why Gerhard Fischer classified Sebald's poetics as an "expatriate writing,"²⁵ at the core of which stands "an unsettled, never-ending search for identity, a wayfaring of self-discovery, with no homeward direction" (Jurgensen 418). And although the topic of catastrophic German history, which has almost destroyed any sense of home, is more explicit in other works, especially in *The Rings of Saturn*, a feeling of a shattered sense of belonging still pervades in *The Alps in the Sea*. It is best captured in the mode of transient dwelling Sebald's narrator adopts while roaming the Corsican landscape. Peter O. Arnds helpfully points out that "Sebald's entire work, with its grand theme of the world's gradual destruction, [...] suggests that wandering is a result of a loss of dwelling, so that the only form of dwelling still possible in our ruined world is wandering" (189).

No explicit ethical advice follows from the lost *Heimat* narrative. Sebald does not condemn the Corsican hunters openly, although he leaves no doubt that they represent a destructive force in human history that causes sorrow and anger. While the Edenic imagery is part of the nostalgic paradigm, Sebald also uses images of apocalypses, especially at the end of his essay, to hint at the possibility of a nearing doomsday. In the last paragraph the narrator describes the red colour of the rocks he sees "as if the stone itself were in flames, glowing from within. Sometimes I thought I saw the outlines of plants and animals burning in that flickering light, or the shapes of a whole race of people stacked into a great pyre. Even the water below seemed to be aflame" (47). In this scene, Sebald uses allusions to apocalypses, as a foreshadowing of what might happen if we continue to destroy nature as it has happened in Corsica – a narrative that bears at least an implicit ethical appeal. Yet, a counter-model against universal destruction can be found in the essay's aesthetics. The fact that Sebald draws on a great number of cultural documents and artworks suggests that his mind, in the end, is rooted in the nonlocal framework of European culture.

Conclusions

In keeping with globalisation studies' claim that the local and the global are always interconnected, Peter Handke and W.G. Sebald present place as a concept with porous boundaries. Instead of focusing on fixed places and a state of constant dwelling, their essayistic narrators describe their being in nature as a journey. In both texts

²⁵ As opposed to categories such as *Exilliteratur* or *Migrationsliteratur*, there exists no concept of 'expatriate literature' in German literary discourse. Whereas writers in exile live abroad due to political reasons, emigrants often leave their home country for economic motives, W.G. Sebald initially left Germany in order to study abroad, first in Switzerland, then in England where he decided to stay and teach literature. Living in England and being somehow exiled from Germany was a decision he made voluntarily. However, he always continued to write in his mother tongue, German, and often travelled back. That is why Sebald does not fit into the conventional categories of the *émigré* writer or the writer in exile. The same goes for Sebald's first-person narrators who "seem to feel rather ill at ease in their old country while not entirely comfortable in the new one" (Fischer 21).

discussed the essayistic first-person narrators roam territories that are clearly not their original *Heimat*. Their intense perception, however, constantly brings back memories of their homelands as they respond to the localities through imaginative associations. Handke's process-like writing is matched by his fleeting search for beauty and a constant urge to redefine his place in nature; meanwhile Sebald is looking for historical traces of destruction and finds them everywhere. Both Handke and Sebald carry the Blood and Soil doctrine of the National Socialists to a different level by portraying militarised landscapes where the soil is literally full of blood. Notions of place in both essays are bound to the spectator whose perception of nature cannot be separated from personal and historical memory and experience. Both essayists address their sense of a lack of belonging not explicitly, but by associations and implications. Whereas Sebald contrasts the Edenic early nineteenth century nature in Corsica with its deforested contemporary condition, Handke develops a more personal mode, describing his sense of separation. Epiphanies allow Handke to transcend a feeling of uprootedness by transforming the hostility of his environment into a place where the essayistic wanderer can dwell, at least temporarily, and achieves a state of mystic unity with nature. Sebald's dwelling on the other hand is rooted in his cultural reference system, in literature and art. Despite their struggle with German nationalism, both writers develop a transnational aesthetics. In line with Ursula Heise's concept of eco-cosmopolitanism, this aesthetics can be understood as a counterdraft to narrow *Heimat* concepts. By setting different localities side by side, Handke and Sebald create a truly European landscape panorama made for transient dwelling. The essay form, in this context, creates an epistemic constellation that allows their authors to view nature from a variety of points of view and in different discursive contexts, establishing a form of writing that captures both the destruction and the underlying pacifist unity of human culture. Its hybrid aesthetics enables Sebald and Handke to represent their dwelling in the world as a shifting mode between feelings of expulsion, longing for a lost *Heimat*, and temporary experiences of being at home. Instead of choosing a linear narrative both writers repeatedly shift focus according to seemingly spontaneous subjective decisions, just as they follow the dictates of the terrain on foot. They refrain from using modern vehicles, and are not afraid of circuitous routes, either in their walking, or in a metaphorical sense, in their writing. The inefficient nature of walking and their digressive, non-linear writing fit well into the form of the essay. As Sarah Pourciau writes, referring to a remark by Adorno, "the essay is the Jew of forms, as foreign words are the Jews of language, and the precarious power of both words and form derive from their uncomfortable relation to the (German) culture in which they dwell without belonging" (Pourciau 645). This holds true for both essays I have discussed and in a more general sense for most German-language post-Shoah nature writing.

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